



NEWS RELEASE

OFFICE OF THE UNITED STATES ATTORNEY
WESTERN DISTRICT OF MISSOURI

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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

PILOT CHARGED WITH MARIJUANA POSSESSION

JEFFERSON CITY, Mo. – Todd P. Graves, United States Attorney for the Western District of Missouri, announced that the pilot of a Piper Cherokee airplane that landed at Fulton Regional Airport was charged today with being in possession with intent to distribute more than 20 kilograms of marijuana.

Russell R. Johnston, 53, of Columbus, Ohio, was charged in a federal criminal complaint filed in U.S. District Court in Jefferson City.

According to the affidavit filed in support of the federal criminal complaint, an air traffic controller in Springfield, Mo., became suspicious of a Piper Cherokee airplane being monitored on radar on March 7, 2004. The pilot of the plane did not respond to the controller's requests, the affidavit says, and was flying in an unusual manner over central Missouri. The plane eventually landed at Fulton Regional Airport at approximately 9:05 a.m.

When officers with the Fulton, Mo., Police Department, were called to the airport, **Johnston** left the area. Law enforcement officers used a canine trained in the detection of illegal narcotics to conduct an exploratory sniff on the outside of the plane. The canine alerted to the presence of an illegal drug coming from the fuselage, so officers searched the plane. Approximately 52 pounds of marijuana was discovered inside a suitcase that was lying in the rear of the plane, directly behind the pilot.

On March 8, 2004, law enforcement officers located **Johnston** hiding behind a culvert near downtown Fulton and arrested him. **Johnston** remains in federal custody pending a detention hearing on March 12, 2004.

Today's criminal complaint also includes a forfeiture count, which would require **Johnston** to forfeit to the government any property used in the commission of the alleged offense, or derived from the proceeds of the alleged offense, including the 1967 Piper Cherokee 180.

Graves cautioned that the charges contained in the complaint are simply accusations, and not evidence of guilt. Evidence supporting the charges must be presented to a federal trial jury, whose duty is to determine guilt or innocence.

This case is being prosecuted by Assistant U.S. Attorney Anthony P. Gonzalez. It was investigated by the Drug Enforcement Administration and the Fulton, Mo., Police Department.

This news release, as well as additional information about the office of the United States Attorney for the Western District of Missouri, is available on-line at

www.usdoj.gov/usao/mow